UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/Sub.2/1999/NGO/15
28 June 1999

Original: ENGLISH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Sub-Commission on Prevention of
Discrimination and Protection
of Minorities
Fifty-first session
Item 6 of the provisional agenda

CONTEMPORARY FORMS OF SLAVERY

Written statement submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[16 June 1999]

GE.99-11490 (E)

Contemporary forms of slavery in Myanmar and the Sudan

1. The Society for Threatened Peoples regards forced labour in Myanmar (Burma) as one of the most important modern forms of slavery. In no other country in the world are there so many citizens forced by the national authorities to work without remuneration. Millions of people have had to do forced labour since the seizure of power by the military junta in 1988. Burmese citizens, regardless of age or sex, are recruited by force for the central Government's war against different nationalities, to serve as bearers of ammunition or supply goods for the army or as scouts or living mine detectors for the soldiers. Hundreds of thousands are deployed without remuneration to rebuild the infrastructure destroyed during the decades of war. Forced labourers are also deployed in the development of new business areas.

2. Hundreds of thousands of members of different nationalities in this multinational State are now obliged to do forced labour. The forced labourers not only have to provide services without remuneration, they are also regularly the victims of encroachments by security forces. The Society for Threatened Peoples is in possession of dozens of reports by female ex-forced labourers who testify to having been raped by soldiers. "They treat us like animals, they try to extract the last bit of gain from us and consider it their right to beat us to death. For the army, we are not human beings", a former forced labourer complains. In view of these massive violations of human rights the Society for Threatened Peoples appeals to the Sub-Commission to request the Burmese Government to discontinue forced labour immediately.

3. The Society for Threatened Peoples is very much concerned about the fact that the traditional forms of slavery also remain in existence. In the Sudan, each year thousands of women and children are carried off into slavery. They are abducted in the border areas of northern and southern Sudan by militias, who receive arms and funding from the Sudanese army. The abductions by these Murahelleen militias in the disputed border areas of northern and southern Sudan contribute to the intimidation of the population and cause further refugee movements. According to their own figures, the Swiss non-governmental organization Christian Solidarity International has bought the freedom of 9,112 slaves in the Sudan since 1995. In May 1999 alone, 1,400 women and children are said to have been freed this way. Independent of the value of this practice, these distressing figures document the continued existence of slavery.

4. In principle we welcome the fact that the Government of the Sudan has finally acknowledged the continued existence of slavery by the establishment of a committee for the repatriation of abducted women and children on 24 May 1999. Furthermore, we welcome the fact that the committee has far-reaching competence in investigating abductions and prosecuting the perpetrators. Nevertheless, we think it extremely problematic that this committee is under the direct control of the Ministry of Justice and that it is composed of delegates not only from the Ministry of the Interior but also of the military and other security forces. The military is, after all, to a considerable extent responsible for the fact that slavery still continues. Therefore, we ask the Sub-Commission to request the Government of the Sudan to assign representatives of independent non-governmental organizations to the committee in order to guarantee its impartial and effective functioning.